Christ in the Capital of the World

How global Christians are revitalizing NYC far beyond Manhattan.

By Mark R. Gornik and Maria Liu Wong

O N A BRISK October Saturday in 2012, hundreds of teenagers, young adults, and youth leaders gathered at Battery Park in Manhattan. In earlier days, the historic public park facing New York Harbor was the first place to receive immigrants from Europe and elsewhere. But this morning, it received members of black and Latino Pentecostal churches nestled throughout Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island. The crowd donned T-shirts and jerseys proclaiming GOD BELONGS IN MY CITY (GBIMC). They were embarking on a rolling prayer meeting that would make its way from the southern tip of Manhattan up to Times Square.

The youth were not tourists. They did not gape at architectural landmarks like the Flatiron and Empire State along the way. Instead, they sang and laughed as they
As we watch family and friends leave the faith, are we more like the elder brother, the father—or the Prodigal Son? 

By Karen Swallow Prior

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walked and talked, texted, and tweeted about their journey. Many stopped to scribble GBMC and John 3:16 in chalk on the sidewalks. They walked the city with purpose and possibility. They knew where they were going.

They intermittently bowed their heads and lifted their arms, blessing and praying for “this great city,” for “the unity of the church and the city,” for “the government and leadership,” and for Mayor Michael Bloomberg. They prayed for public officials and city employees, especially for teachers, firefighters, and police.

A sister contingent of New York youth started from Central Park up in Harlem. A few hours later, the two groups met in Times Square at the tkts discount Broadway ticket booth. Cheers, prayers, and improvised signs went up as the youth watched themselves on a giant video screen overlooking the bustling median. Now one entity, they moved eastward to Grand Central Terminal.

The few hundred who had started in Battery Park and Harlem had blossomed into some 1,500 marchers. They overflowed the cavernous hall with its central clock tower, and they spilled out into the passageways and onto the busy streets and sidewalks. Customers at the Apple Store, perched on the mezzanine at Grand Central, stopped to see what was happening.

As they started to kneel in prayer, however, the transit police arrived. “You cannot stay,” they announced. And they were serious.
The entire station seemed to pause, waiting to see what would happen next.

A WORLD OF FAITH IN THE CITY
There are two ways Christians tend to see the city and God in the city. The first peers through a lens that sees primarily what is wrong with it. It can miss seeing the city as God’s good gift, and the church already active in the city. Because it often moves quickly into problem-solving, like a missions trip to “save” or “bring God to” New York, it can overlook what many churches are already doing and the dynamic ways that cities work.

The second way is to try to see the city through the eyes of God. Listening to the Holy Spirit, it seeks to build on what is already happening, working within existing structures and relationships. Change comes from the inside out, through people who know and live there. They can make a longer commitment and deeper difference than those who stop in and just as quickly leave.

Many forces can prevent outsiders from seeing what God is doing in New York. The city’s booming media industry, from television to film, to fashion and music, has reinforced for many non–New Yorkers an image of sophistication on one hand or urban grit on the other. But rarely does pop culture capture the religious ferment going on underneath.

We at City Seminary of New York see God at work in ways that confound stereotypes of a secular landscape. That work is led by grassroots ministries energized by an influx of Christians from around the world coming to New York City. Their work is less about setting up specific programs or starting new churches—though they do that in great numbers—than about enabling fellow Christians to live out their faith in the city, in order to bless their neighborhoods and neighbors.

GBIMC is one such grassroots ministry. It launched in 2009 at Brooklyn’s Park Slope Christian Tabernacle, a Latino Pentecostal congregation located a few blocks from the new Barclays Center, set in place before recent gentrification. Members of the church’s CrossOver Youth Ministry had picked up a newspaper in the subway that read “Got God?” highlighting a campaign to fill the subways with the message, “A Million New Yorkers are good without God. Are you?”

It would be easy to see GBIMC as a counterpoint, a protest, to a secular age. But that would be wrong. Instead, they believed that whatever people thought about God, the question pointed back to them: Was the church a living demonstration of his kingdom?

With youth minister Daniel Sanabria, and harnessing new social media matched to relationships in the city, CrossOver members embarked on their first prayer walk, the one that ended with 1,500 crowding Grand Central Terminal (and is now an annual event). With a vision rooted in Jeremiah 29:4–7, and a desire to make their faith public, GBIMC has now spread to 30 other cities.

GBIMC is a moving and festive demonstration of the vitality that global Christians bring to New York. Nancy Foner, professor of sociology at Hunter College, says that in 2009, immigrants and their American-born children composed 55 percent of New York City’s population.

Previous waves of immigrants to NYC came from Europe. Today, the newest New Yorkers arrive from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the West Indies, places where Christianity is already flourishing. Cities like Seoul and Hong Kong; Monrovia, Liberia; Accra, Ghana; Kingston, Jamaica; and Buenos Aires are centers of vibrant Christian growth. The global church is on the move, and cities play a central role in connecting its members.

Just as financial networks flow through New York and connect to other cities, so do circuits of faith. As people move to New York City to build a better life for their families—a dynamic that has shaped the city since its founding as New Amsterdam in 1624—many are bringing their churches and distinct ministry practices. Of course, migration as a primary means of church expansion is not a new trend, but instead goes back to the earliest Christians. But because of technology and greater access to air travel, this movement runs in both directions.

As a result, New York City has arguably the greatest global diversity and density of Christianity of any city. As you travel eastbound on the #7 subway line from Times Square to Flushing, Queens, the number of languages you hear multiples. As The New York Times has noted, perhaps one in ten New Yorkers is now a Pentecostal, most likely with ties to Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the West Indies. Our research at City Seminary suggests that 2,000 new churches have been established by the newest New Yorkers since the 1980s, and that estimate may be conservative. While many of these churches are Pentecostal, they represent a wide range of denominations and theological traditions. They are crossing borders both physical and intangible.

There is a single Baptist church building in Queens that hosts Korean, Indonesian, and Punjabi congregations. Many Catholic parishes, such as one in the Bronx, offer services in English, Spanish, and Twi. As the historian Andrew Walls writes, “The Ephesian moment—the social coming together of people of [different] cultures to experience Christ”—has come again, describing a church that is more diverse than ever. And that global church is here in New York City.

Manhattan continues to see churches thrive in stately buildings, school auditoriums, and music clubs. But the centers of Christian life and growth are increasingly found where immigration has had the greatest impact—in the borrowed church buildings and repurposed spaces in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island. This development, however, is not about numbers, but about how the young Christians of GBIMC and others are doing theology “on the ground,” working out the gospel in every sphere, culture, and segment of life.
To illustrate how this boundary-crossing faith is being lived out, we look at three stories, starting in Brooklyn.

‘WE WILL NOT GO HOME THE SAME’

“It’s going to be an awesome day in the kingdom!” says pastor Abosede “Abby” Oyesile on a Sunday morning at Redeemed Christian Church of God (rccg), Chapel of Hope. “We will not go home the same.”

The air in the overflowing storefront church in the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, is swaying. For nearly an hour, the largely Nigerian church of over 100 members praises God in song and dance. The choir, drummer, and keyboardists lead the choruses, while others bring together hands, tambourines, and shakers: “Awesome God, mighty God, You are lifted up / Awesome God, you are highly lifted up.” Young and old are dressed in a mix of traditional African and contemporary Western clothing. Some wear brightly patterned, flowing garb while others sport business-casual attire.

Pastor Adesibi Oyesile, Abby’s husband, wears a suit that would blend in on Wall Street. When he steps forward to preach, he kneels and begins to pray: “You are so good, blessed be your name.” Standing up, he instructs each person to say, “Thank God I am here,” and then preaches on how “the spiritual presence of God will always be with you.” He should know.

Oyesile moved to New York from Lagos in 1974, at age 22, to study accounting and finance, making his home in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Those were among the city’s toughest days; “Bed-Stuy” was, and still can be, among its roughest parts. In 1981, Oyesile was shot in an attempted robbery, the bullet going through his chest.

A few years after graduation, Oyesile went back to Lagos. A decade later, he returned to Brooklyn, seeking more opportunities for his children. He became one of the earliest members of rccg in Brooklyn, a Lagos-based Pentecostal ministry that is thoroughly global in scale. In New York, rccg started with a handful of parishes; within a decade, it grew to more than 50 congregations throughout the five boroughs. To belong to a local Redeemed church is to be part of a ministry where leaders, themes, and songs continually cross back and forth between continents and cities.

In 2006, Oyesile and Abby’s pastor, Nimi Wariboko, sensed it was time to start a new church. With money for a few months’ rent and musical equipment, some Bibles and folding chairs, and a few family and church members, they were off. Next stop: Bedford-Stuyvesant, the very neighborhood where Oyesile nearly lost his life some 25 years earlier.

Oyesile juggles multiple jobs and ministers in a variety
of worlds. He is a pastor with two doctorates who works at a Wall Street insurance firm. Every available hour, evening and weekend, he devotes to his church. He is also on faculty at City Seminary. And he is a father of five.

Oyesile is one example of the entrepreneurial energy and passion that has taken root in New York City for the kingdom. “How do you implement your vision?” Oyesile asks. “Not me,” he says, “but the power of the Holy Spirit.”

At the end of the service, the doctors, taxi drivers, lawyers, nurses, security guards, students, musicians, and parents at Chapel of Hope spill out onto the streets of Brooklyn. As Oyesile reminds them, “This is your city. God is with you. Go out. You are filled with hope.”

LIVES OF TESTIMONY

Priscilla Walton and her younger sister, Kat Pan, hail from Queens. They are committed to living and working in the city long-term, sharing the gospel in the everyday.

Their parents, from Taiwan and South Korea, worship at Christian Testimony, an immigrant Chinese church in Elmhurst in western Queens. Members for years, they brought their daughters and the girls’ two cousins each week (one of the cousins now plants churches in Queens).

Pan, a recent college graduate, carries on the family legacy by leading the Christian Testimony youth group. “I want them to see more than what is in front of them and to help them think through what it will be like in college as a believer.” Each Friday night and Sunday afternoon, she and co-leader Jonathan Zee challenge the youth to take their faith seriously, even recruiting them to attend seminary for urban youth leadership development. “I want to invest in New York City,” she says.

“They helped me understand the gospel was not isolated,” says Walton of her parents and church. “I grew up with a strong understanding of myself as a Chinese American Christian.”

At age 9, Walton helped her mother, a retired educator with the NYC Department of Education, prepare and perform skits for children’s Sunday school. Later she helped with the youth ministry, which took a missions trip to Trinidad. She was surprised and encouraged to see 17-year-olds serving as deacons in the Trinidad church; they were involved as leaders, getting up as early as 5 A.M. to serve. She realized that she could do something now.

After graduating from Goucher College in Maryland, Walton’s passion for justice led her to become an elementary teacher in inner-city Baltimore. One day a second-grade student asked her, “Why are the teachers always angry, the hot lunch always cold, and the boys’ bathroom floor always wet?” This prompted her to think more creatively about what it meant to love her neighbor. When she returned to New York City, she arrived with a renewed vision as a teacher and leader in a charter school network, first in Harlem and now in Elmhurst.

Her husband, Jonathan, heads New York City Urban Project, a campus ministry of InterVarsity. Priscilla says, “If we want to change the city, we have to start in our home. Our ministries will thrive if our home thrives.” Newly married and in their 20s, this is reflected in part in the Waltons’ decision to eat logoff (local, green, organic, fair trade, slave free), and to worship in a multiethnic church in Elmhurst, New Life Fellowship, where they hope to raise their biracial children.

PUBLIC SERVICE IS MINISTRY

Alan Farrell believes that God is using his efforts “to redeem God’s creation.” In particular, he is “committed to strengthening fathers and families,” which is one reason he was grateful for the chance to lead nyc Dads: The Mayor’s Fatherhood Initiative.

In his early 40s, Farrell is a second-generation Trinidadian raised in the Bronx by his mother and grandmother. Growing up he had little contact with his father, though today they enjoy a relationship. While his father would send birthday cards through his teenage years, they only reconnected at Farrell’s college graduation. “Fatherhood is never too late,” he says.

Farrell came to Christ in college, after which his faith was formed at Miracle Provider Church, which serves a largely African American and Caribbean community in Wakefield, a neighborhood in the Bronx. There, new immigrants work hard to establish a future for their families. The Miracle Provider community, some 300 people strong, encourages their young people in their faith and life path.

After college, Farrell earned a master’s degree in urban policy from the New School, attended City Seminary (where he met his wife, Janice, who serves on the faculty), and today works at City Hall. He spearheads nyc Dads, coordinating 12 city agencies that help fathers become better dads.

Farrell’s work takes him from meeting with young men at
City Hall to speaking on a panel on faith and fatherhood at a Queens church, to attending a fathers’ support group in Harlem. He regularly convenes city agencies to review how they can better support all fathers, especially black and Latino fathers.

Through it all, Farrell doesn’t come in with all the answers. “When I work with citywide organizations and nonprofits, I start from a point of learning. My conversations are invitations and pilgrimages into communities.”

What Farrell does know is that God cares about families and fathers and the communities where they live. He’s committed to living his faith with passion and commitment through public service, caring for the common good wherever God gives him an opportunity. It is a story that flows from his being in the city and seeing it through the eyes of faith. As he says, “public service is ministry.”

The Oyesiles, the Waltons, Pan, and Farrell are, without calling attention to themselves, demonstrating a lasting engagement in the life and health of New York. Ministry is woven into everyday life. In tune with how the city works, they are thinking and living in Christian ways whereby small changes combine to make critical differences.

As the Lord told Paul when he first arrived in Corinth, concerned about his ability to do ministry and find partners there, “I have many people in this city.” Christian faith is growing through the unpredictable energies of the Spirit and the dynamics of a globalizing city. Flowing from the love of God for the city, its shoots are sprouting in ways no one could have planned.

And as widespread demographic change comes swiftly to the United States, what is happening in New York can be a window into the future of the church and faithful activity in other cities across the country.

No one expected hundreds of diverse people to fill Grand Central Terminal last October—especially ones wearing shirts that proclaim God Belongs in My City.

When the transit police told them to disperse, they did. But instead of returning to their homes or churches, everyone fanned out across the sidewalks over a stretch of several blocks. Kneeling on the pavement, hands lifted up, they offered prayers to God for the peace and flourishing of the city. It was an impromptu yet perfect ending to a day spent moving across the city, and one symbol of the vibrant Christianity there.

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